



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

PREFACE TO THE FRENCH EDITION OF *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*

BY PAUL LEWIS

Wilkie Collins wrote a preface for all his books, often writing a new version as they came out in new editions. In foreign translations the preface was usually omitted. But the French edition of *The Woman in White* (*La Femme en Blanc*, Hetzel, Paris 1861) not only has a preface, but it was specially written by Wilkie Collins as an address to his French readers. It is similar in content to the preface to the first English edition but longer and more detailed. Strangely it seems to have been overlooked by Collins's biographers.

The preface is dated June 1861 and was written at Wilkie's address at Harley Street, where he had moved just over a year earlier and where he finished writing the monthly parts of *The Woman in White* in the first half of 1860. The book - and presumably the preface - was translated into French by Wilkie's friend Émile Forgues. He had written about Wilkie's talent in a long piece in *Revue des deux Mondes* in November 1855 which contains extracts from *Basil and Hide and Seek* translated into French. He then translated the first French edition of one of Wilkie's books *Le Secret* [*The Dead Secret*] published by Hachette in 1856. Collins praised his translation saying "I was by no means surprised to find my fortunate work of fiction - not translated, in the mechanical sense of the word - but transformed from a novel that I had written in my language, to a novel that you might have written in yours."

Although the preface itself seems to have remained un-noted by scholars, parts of it were used - some in quotes, some not - by Louis Dépret in a chapter on Wilkie Collins in his *Chez les Anglais* published by Hachette in 1879. That chapter was referred to by both Nuel Pharr Davis and Catherine Peters in their biographies of Wilkie Collins.

La Femme en Blanc was first published late in 1861. Writing from Harley Street to his mother on 12 December 1861 Wilkie says

"The French translation of *The Woman in White* is published in two handsomely printed Volumes - and the French critics are very civil - so are letters from French readers. You like a title, don't you? What do [you] think of a French Duke, writing to me in raptures? Ha! ha! ha! "

PREFACE
WRITTEN BY THE AUTHOR OF 'THE WOMAN IN WHITE' FOR THE READERS OF
THE FRENCH TRANSLATION

Several years ago, I found myself in the public gallery witnessing the proceedings of a criminal trial which was being heard in London.

While I listened to the proceedings, which had no significance in themselves, and did not provide me with either the characters or events which you will find in the following pages, I was struck by the dramatic manner in which the story of the crime unfolded under the investigation of the court, as the account of each witness was heard in turn. As each of them stood up to provide their own personal account, as, right through the hearing, each separate ring came to form with the others a continuous chain of irrefutable evidence, I found that my attention was more and more captivated; I saw that it had the same effect on the other people around me; and this phenomenon took on a growing intensity as the chain lengthened, as it tightened, as it came closer to what was, in the whole story, the climax. --Certainly, I thought, a series of fictional events would lend itself extremely well to being revealed like this; certainly, by the same means that I saw employed here, one could put into the soul of the reader this conviction, this belief that I saw produced by the succession of individual testimonies, so different in form, and yet so completely unified by their continual progress toward the same end. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that an attempt at such a method would succeed. So, when the hearing was over, I went home determined to try it.

But when I had to give a definite form to the thought that had preoccupied me, I saw that the thing was not so easy to do as I had believed. It presented some serious literary difficulties which my experience as a novelist had not yet made me able to overcome. I decided to wait until I had acquired the skills of my art to a higher degree; to wait until time and chance offered me another opportunity.

Here is how that opportunity came to me.

During the year 1859, Mr Charles Dickens launched the weekly journal which he christened "All The Year Round"¹, and which he began with a novel of his own ("A Tale of Two Cities"). When the publication of this work (in weekly instalments) had been completed, I was invited to write the novel which would immediately follow him in the columns of the new 'periodical'.

When I had accepted the responsibility of addressing myself to one of the biggest audiences that England could offer, after the greatest novelist of our country had just held it under the spell of his talent, I felt a rather natural anxiety in asking myself whether I would be worthy of the confidence placed in me. And, at this critical moment, the idea that I had put to one side some years before, came back into my mind. I resolved, this time, to carry it out. All the right conditions were offered to me; I was left in charge of how long my work would be; no restriction was placed on the choice of subject; the most complete independence as to the form which I would give it was guaranteed to me against any interference whatsoever. It was under these favourable auspices that, for the second time, I set about the job which I had attempted before in vain. In other words, I gave myself the task of making my story be told by the characters of the novel themselves, (like the witnesses I had heard in the court) that is to say by each of them in turn, and by placing them in different situations, which the course of events made for them, so that each of them could, in their turn, take the story on and, one after the other, guide it to its conclusion.

If the result of this work, altered in this way by circumstances, had led me to achieve nothing more than a certain novelty in the layout, I would not dream of talking about it here. For such an insignificant result, the least attention would be too much. But as I progressed with my work, I discovered that the very substance of the novel, as well as the literary form, drew strength from the new demands to which I happily subjected myself. Carrying out my plan forced me to make progress without a break, continuously and simultaneously, in the story as a whole; it obliged me to establish in my mind a perfectly clear idea of the characters before I risked placing them in the situation to which,

in advance, I had assigned them; and when they came on stage, it provided them with a new opportunity to show themselves through their written testimony, which they were supposed to provide to a sort of enquiry, and which, at the same time, formed part of the natural progression of the story. Such were the real advantages of the experiment I attempted in this novel; it put me under the most rigorous yoke in the discipline of literature. My book and me could do nothing but benefit from it.

Now that I have briefly indicated the circumstances in which the *Woman in White* came to see the light of day, it would, I think, be useless to detain the reader by any preliminary remarks on the dramatic purpose towards which I aimed in writing it, or on the problems of human nature that, in the original conception of the book, or in their development, I proposed to resolve. From both these points of view, the book itself, notwithstanding its faults and deficiencies, is intelligible enough to need no comment. The few words it remains for me to say will only concern the way in which the story was received, both in England and America.

Before the periodical publication of the *Woman in White* (in London and New York simultaneously) had stretched over many weeks, the novelty of the plan I was working on became clear and caught the attention of the public. After the appearance of each number of the journal, there came to me from all sides written testimony of the curiosity, of the interest that my readers wanted to show me, in England; in Canada, even as far as the 'backwood-settlements', those germs of future villages, dumped at the extreme limit of American civilisation; especially in the great cities of that country which was, only yesterday, the Republic of the United States.

The characters -- whatever criticism can be made of them in other ways -- had the good fortune to produce, in the greater part of the readers, the same impression as living people. The two 'women's roles' for example (Laura and Miss Halcombe) were made such warm friends that, when a climax in the story appeared to threaten one or the other with some ominous adventure, I received several letters written in the most serious tone, begging me to 'save their lives'!

Miss Halcombe, in particular, was taken so much in favour that people forced me -- on more than one occasion -- to declare if this character was painted from nature; if need be, they wanted to know if the living model from which I had worked, would consent to hear the appeals of various single men who, completely convinced of having in her an excellent woman, proposed to ask her for her hand!

For another group of readers, 'The Secret' which, in this story, is linked to the life of 'Sir Percival Glyde' became, in the end, the subject of an exasperated curiosity, which gave rise to various bets of which I was made the referee. But not one of these gamblers - and outside them, not one of my readers - succeeded, as far as I know, to guess what this secret could be, -- before the moment had arrived where I had already stopped so that the discovery of it could be approached.

As far as Count Fosco is concerned, innocent gentlemen in their dozens, who had the unhappiness to be excessively fat, were denounced suddenly as having provided me with the elements of this portrait; and, on the rare occasions where my voice tried to drown the noise of these hypotheses, I had to declare "that any novelist who limited himself to one single model, couldn't hope to make a character he created come alive."; I had to state "that hundreds of individuals, of whom not one suspected it, had in their turn, sat for Count Fosco, as they also had for the rest of the characters in the book"; no-one wanted to believe what I said on this subject. The 'thin villains' (one told me) are without doubt very common; but a 'fat villain' was, in the novel taken in general, such a striking exception to the established rules of the romance, that I could absolutely not have been able to meet, in real life, more than one example of this species. I was free, of course, to deny the fact; but the Count had been recognised, alive and well, by trustworthy witnesses, both in London and in Paris, and it was useless to take the discussion further.

Supposing he really does exist, I beg him to accept my apologies, with the formal assurance that if I have made a resemblance, it is very much by chance.

There came a moment when the whisper went round that I had lost myself in the labyrinth of my novel, that I did not know how to conclude it; and that I had offered a fair reward to whoever, for that consideration, would like to lend me assistance. The completion of the story (in the periodical) gave the death blow to these enjoyable rumours. Its second publication, in book form, as much in England as in America, brought it a new public, perhaps even larger than the first. Edition rapidly followed edition. A German translation, printed in Liepzig, was wonderfully welcomed by the readers across the Rhine. And now (thanks to the valuable assistance of my friend M. Forgues) the *Woman in White* is going to reappear in a new form. It is going to make itself heard in Paris with the excellent recommendation of his Grace the Duke of Aumale, at such an appropriate place and given with such generosity.²

Thus is simply sketched the story of this novel. I have told it without any reservation, simply out of recognition of the generous welcome already given to my book, and also because, naturally, I want to demonstrate to the French readers that I do not present myself recklessly to them as the foreign author of a foreign book, without some preliminary evidence on behalf of the book and the author. I have written in all honesty this little preface; and now that it is almost finished, I am not going to pretend that I will not follow anxiously the impression that the *Woman in White* will produce on the countrymen of Balzac, of Victor Hugo, of George Sand, of Soulié, of Eugène Sue and of Dumas. If they believed that this story could in the smallest way pay the debt I owe, both as a reader and as a writer, to the French novelists, it would quickly bring tears to my eyes, but it is not the least of the hopes that I have for it.

Harley Street, London,
June 1861

Wilkie Collins

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¹ Word for word, 'All round (or all the length of) the year'. In good French one simply says 'All the year'.

² This is an allusion to the speech given by the Duke of Aumale at the annual dinner of the Literary Fund in London in May 1861. In referring the French reader directly to this, Mr Wilkie Collins, in a note for which we substitute this one, forgot that the French press, -- with due respect to the Ministers without Portfolio -- has not had the freedom to reproduce the speech in question. It only appeared in the 'Belgian Independent'.